

‘Quel funeste poison? Racine, Nicole and theatrical crisis’

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The *querelle du théâtre* during the seventeenth century is a subject that has received sustained critical attention.¹ My starting point will be one small corner of the ongoing debate, namely the response by Jean Racine to Pierre Nicole’s condemnation of the theatre and the subsequent reaction of two supporters of Port-Royal.

‘Empoisonneurs publics’: dangerous dramatists

In the barbed debate between Nicole and Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, Nicole turned his sights upon Desmarets’s previous work as a dramatist. Retitling his series of letters (letters 11-18) *Les Visionnaires*, the Port-Royal moralist chose deliberately to evoke Desmarets’s most notable comedy, *Les Visionnaires*, first performed in 1637 but restaged at regular intervals in 1665-6.² In the most colourful passage from Letter XI, Nicole manages to tar all dramatists and novelists with the same brush of corruption and danger:

Un faiseur de Romans et un poète de théâtre est un

empoisonneur public, non des corps, mais des âmes des fidèles, qui se doit croire coupable d'une infinité d'homicides spirituels, ou qu'il a causés en effet, ou qu'il a pu causer par ses écrits pernicioeux. Plus il a eu soin de couvrir d'un voile d'honnêteté les passions criminelles qu'il y décrit, plus il les a rendues dangereuses, et capables de surprendre et de corrompre les âmes simples et innocentes. Ces sortes de péchés sont d'autant plus effroyables, qu'ils sont toujours persistants, parce que ces livres ne périssent pas, et qu'ils répandent toujours un venin, qui s'accroît et s'augmente par les méchants effets qu'ils continuent de produire dans ceux qui les lisent.³

[A creator of Romances and a poet of the theatre is a public poisoner, not of bodies but rather of the souls of the faithful; such a writer must believe himself guilty of an infinite number of spiritual homicides, either effectively caused by him or caused by his pernicious writings. The greater the care he has taken to cover with a veil of civility the criminal passions that he describes in his works, the more he has made those passions dangerous and liable to corrupt simple and innocent souls.

These kinds of sin are just as terrifying as they persist at all times, because such books do not perish but spread at all times a venom that grows and increases through the ill effects that they continue to produce in those who read them.]⁴

The sustained image of the profession of playwright and novelist as poisoner of the public's body and soul seems aimed to provoke the most vigorous response from Desmarets, the self-appointed scourge of Jansenism. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, Desmarets appears in his response both to distance himself from his former profession and to accept the charge of poets as poisoners, telling Nicole that 'je n'ai jamais fait le métier de poète, ni de faiseur de comédies et de romans, ni d'empoisonneur public' [I have never adopted the profession of poet, creator of theatre and romances, or of public poisoner], adding that 'j'ai eu, grâce à Dieu, d'autres charges que celles-là dans le monde' (p.219) [thanks to God, in day to day life I have other duties than those ones]. Although to modern eyes it would seem strange for Desmarets, who achieved considerable theatrical success, to claim not to have held the 'métier' of poet, we should not forget that in the seventeenth century it was widely deemed acceptable for an *honnête homme* to write verse and prose but unacceptable to make a career of it.⁵

If Desmarets seemed reluctant to take issue with the image of

poison in his response to Nicole, it became the major rallying call in the ensuing polemic between Racine and those who entered the debate. Racine wrote three pieces in his quarrel with Nicole and two other anti-theatre writers and supporters of Port-Royal, Philippe Goibaud du Bois and Jean Barbier d'Aucour, who entered the debate in response to Racine. However, only the first of Racine's pieces, 'Lettre à l'auteur des *Hérésies imaginaires* et des deux *Visionnaires*', was published in his lifetime, and was the only letter of the three to which Goibaud du Bois and Barbier d'Aucour responded.⁶

Racine launches the first piece by claiming not to take sides in Nicole's spat with Desmarets (mischievously adding, 'je laisse à juger au monde quel est le visionnaire de vous deux', 225 [I will let others judge who is the deluded one of you two]), before registering his objection to Nicole's use of terminology in his war against dramatists/writers of fiction: 'vous pouviez employer des termes plus doux que ces mots d'*empoisonneurs publics*, et de *gens horribles parmi les chrétiens*', (226) [you could use gentler terms than 'public poisoners' and 'terrible people in the midst of Christians']. The main thrust of the letter is to satirize those at Port-Royal who seem to hold inconsistent views about theatre and fiction. The fact, for example, that the 'solitaires' at Port-Royal were depicted in a favourable

light by Madeleine de Scudéry in her ‘histoire romaine’, *Clélie*, does not seem to have led them to condemn the work’s poisonous qualities. On the contrary, Racine tells them

j’avais ouï dire que vous aviez souffert patiemment qu’on vous eût loués dans ce livre horrible. L’on fit venir au désert le volume qui parlait de vous. Il y courut de main en main, et tous les solitaires voulurent voir l’endroit où ils étaient traités d’*illustres*.’ (228-9)

[I heard that you had patiently endured the fact that you were praised in that terrible book. You had the volume that spoke of you delivered to your desert, and it was passed from hand to hand, with all the solitaires wanting to see the part in the text in which they were called ‘illustrious’.]

Racine’s choice of terminology here is illuminating. Instead of poison being spread, we find on all levels gossip and rumour being disseminated.

Through gossip (‘ouï dire’), Racine himself hears of their reaction to their portrait in *Clélie*, and similarly, like rumours being spread, the book is passed from person to person at Port-Royal itself. Immediately after these lines, Racine again writes of ‘le bruit qui courait’ (229) [the rumour that was spreading], this time of the false rumour in Pascal’s *Lettres provinciales* that Desmarets was working on a defence of the Jesuits. I would argue that what

might seem like the casual juxtaposition of imagery pertaining to poison and gossip becomes something much more significant in Racine's later theatre, especially at the time that he was contemplating abandoning the theatre altogether.

Another perceived inconsistency that Racine is keen to point out in the light of Port-Royal's hostility to the theatre is the fact that one of the leading pedagogues and translators at Port-Royal, Le Maître de Sacy, chose to translate the works of the Latin dramatist Terence. As Racine playfully concludes, 'Ainsi vous voilà vous-mêmes au rang des empoisonneurs' (228) [So there are you yourselves in the ranks of poisoners].⁷

In their counter-polemic, both Goibaud Du Bois and Barbier d'Aucour, stung by Racine's implication of hypocrisy, sprang to the defence of Port-Royal by developing the very terms and examples that Racine had used. Both profess surprise at Racine's objection to the poisoner tag by using the ingenious argument that the passions inspired within the theatre are themselves forms of poison. As Goibaud Du Bois tells the playwright,

Peut-être avez-vous oublié, en écrivant votre lettre, que la Comédie n'a point d'autre fin que d'inspirer des passions aux spectateurs, et que les passions, dans le sentiment même des philosophes païens, sont les maladies et les poisons d'âmes. (234)

[Perhaps you forgot in writing your letter that the theatre has no other purpose than to inspire passions in the spectator, and that the passions, even as seen by pagan philosophers, are the diseases and poisons of the soul.]

Indeed, he adds, Racine would seem to be the only dramatist not to accept this premise:

je crois qu'après vous il n'y en a point qui ne sachent que l'art du théâtre consiste principalement dans la composition de ces poisons spirituels. N'ont-ils pas toujours nommé la Comédie *l'art de charmer*, et n'ont-ils pas cru, en lui donnant cette qualité, la mettre au-dessus de tous les arts? Ne voit-on pas que leurs ouvrages sont composés d'un mélange agréable d'intrigues, d'intérêts, de passions et de personnes, où ils ne considèrent point ce qui est véritable, mais seulement ce qui est propre pour toucher les spectateurs, et pour faire couler dans leurs coeurs des passions qui les empoisonnent de telle sorte qu'ils s'oublient eux-mêmes, et qu'ils prennent un intérêt sensible dans des aventures imaginaires? (235)

[I think that after you there isn't a single person who doesn't know that the art of the theatre consists mainly of the concoction

of such spiritual poisons. Haven't they always called the theatre 'the art of bewitching', and haven't they believed that in giving the theatre such a quality, they have placed it above all the arts? Can't it be seen that their works are composed of an agreeable mixture of intrigues, interests, passions and people, where what is true does not enter their heads, but only what is appropriate to move spectators, and to allow passions that poison them to flow in their hearts, to the extent that they forget themselves and immerse themselves in imaginary intrigues.]

Despite acknowledging that certain lines of dramatic verse might be deemed innocent, Goibaud du Bois is uncompromising in his view that 'la volonté du poète est toujours criminelle' (245) [the poet's will is always criminal] and that, even if certain poetic lines lack requisite power to poison the audience, 'le poète veut toujours qu'ils [les vers] empoisonnent' (245) [the poet always wants his verses to poison].

In response to Racine's comment that Sacy, who had translated the works of Terence, might also be branded an 'empoisonneur', both Goibaud du Bois and Barbier d'Aucour leap to Sacy's defence by citing the pedagogical purpose of such translations; they were to be used in the

teaching of pupils at the Port-Royal schools in suitably abridged versions.⁸

As Goibaud du Bois asks,

Quel rapport trouvez-vous donc entre un poète de théâtre et le traducteur de Térence? L'un traduit un auteur pour l'instruction des enfants, qui est un bien nécessaire; l'autre fait des comédies, dont la meilleure qualité est d'être inutile. L'un travaille à éclaircir la langue de l'Église, l'autre enseigne à parler le langage des fables et des idolâtres; l'un ôte tout le poison que les païens ont mis dans leurs comédies, l'autre en compose de nouvelles, et tâche d'y mettre de nouveaux poisons. (245)

[What link can you find between a theatrical poet and the translator of Terence? One translates an author for the education of children, which is a necessary good; the other writes plays, the best quality of which is to be without use. One works to elucidate the language of the Church, the other learns to speak the language of fables and worshippers of idols; one removes all the poison that the pagans put into their theatre, the other composes new plays and tries to put new kinds of poison into them.]

Barbier d'Aucour takes a similar position:

Que peut-on donc dire de celui qui, pour avoir un prétexte de

traiter d'empoisonneur l'auteur de cette traduction, et d'envelopper dans ce reproche tous ceux de Port-Royal, selon le nouveau privilège qu'il se donne, tâche lui-même d'empoisonner un dessein qui n'est pas seulement très innocent, mais qui est encore très louable et très utile? (260)

[What therefore can one say of the person who, in order to have a pretext to call the author of this translation a poisoner and, according to the new permission that he grants himself, to envelop all those at Port-Royal with such a reproach, tries himself to poison a purpose that is not only absolutely innocent but also very praiseworthy and useful?]

The fact that both defenders of Port-Royal set the idea of the 'utilité' of Sacy's pedagogical project against the 'inutilité' of the theatre calls to mind Goibaud du Bois's biblical reference to the dangers of 'paroles oisives' (236), when he cites Matthew XII, 36, translated by Sacy in his translation of the Bible as 'les hommes rendront compte au jour du jugement de toute parole inutile' (in the Vulgate, 'omne verbum otiosum'). Such critics seem to apply the status of idle gossip to the theatre, on the same level that the 1690 Furetière dictionary defines 'caquet' as 'abondance

de paroles inutiles qui n'ont point de solidité' [abundance of useless words, lacking all solidity].

Poisonous words: gossip and rumour in *Phèdre*

When analyzing a play like *Phèdre*, its theatrical impact needs no biographical or contextual information in order to be fully appreciated. However, the personal or professional crisis that Racine seems to have encountered when he, more or less concurrently, abandoned the theater, started work with Boileau as historiographer to the King and secretly re-established ties with Port-Royal is significant in a broader context.⁹ It is clear that both Racine, in his preface to *Phèdre*, and his son Louis in his analysis of the circumstances of the first performances of the play, in *Mémoires contenant quelques particularités sur la vie et les ouvrages de Jean Racine*, make a direct link between *Phèdre* and the earlier theatrical debate with Port-Royal, evoking in the process many terms used in that *querelle*. By stressing the centrality of virtue in *Phèdre*, Racine expresses the hope that the 'solides' and 'utiles instructions' contained in his play might serve as 'un moyen de réconcilier la Tragédie avec quantité de Personnes célèbres par leur piété et par leur doctrine qui l'ont condamnée

dans ces derniers temps' [a way of reconciling Tragedy with a number of people, famous for their piety and doctrine, who have condemned it in recent years],¹⁰ and he clearly has in mind here the words of one of these famously pious denunciators of the theatre; Nicole had made the point in the subtitles of sections of the 1667 version of his *Traité de la Comédie* that 'les vertus chrétiennes ne sont pas propres à paraître sur le théâtre' (64) [Christian virtues are not effective to appear on the stage' and that 'la Comédie n'a rien de solide' (106) [the theatre has no solidity]. Racine would seem implicitly to admit here that his previous tragedies lacked the 'utilité' and 'solidité' of this new work and to accept, whether for rhetorical effect or from personal conviction, that his previous theatre did indeed have the status of idle talk that Goibaud du Bois had applied to it. For his part, Louis Racine is keen to see *Phèdre* as an important transition point for his father between a worldly life and one of piety; as Georges Forestier has pointed out in his edition of the Racine's complete theatre, this observation by Louis was largely responsible for so many subsequent Jansenist readings of the play (1621-1626). But for our purposes, it is interesting that Louis should claim that his father, having taken issue with the term 'empoisonneur' [poisoner] to describe the profession of playwrights in the original *querelle*, should at the time of *Phèdre* accept precisely the same

appellation, thereby implying that, whereas his previous plays could be seen in such a light, *Phèdre* is somehow different: ‘il avoua que les Auteurs des Pièces de théâtre étaient des empoisonneurs publics; et il reconnut qu’il était peut-être le plus dangereux de ces empoisonneurs’ (1151-2) [he admitted that the authors of theatrical plays were public poisoners, and he recognized that he was perhaps the most dangerous of such poisoners].

While Racine’s return to the themes and vocabulary of the theatrical debate in his prefatory writing might not be entirely unexpected at a time that he was about to take a 12-year absence from the stage, the reemergence of similar terminology within the fabric of the tragedy itself is perhaps less probable. Yet, as I hope to show in the remainder of this chapter, everything that is spread in *Phèdre* (the verbs ‘répandre’ and ‘semer’ are omnipresent in the play) – rumour, gossip, disease, poison – brings to the fore concepts that recall the profound unease that lay at the core of theatrical debates a few years earlier and that exercise a powerful hold over seventeenth-century discourse. Silje Normand’s comment in her study on perceptions of poison in early modern France that ‘the language of poison and contamination was used not only to denote physical infection from plague or toxin, but also to connote moral and spiritual degeneracy’¹¹ will be crucial here.

My aim is not so much to read *Phèdre* in a reductive manner – after

all, the play is far too subtle and rich to be bound up within a single interpretation – but to explore avenues in which the reappearance of these themes might deepen our appreciation of the play and offer ways in which the theatre becomes a commentary on itself.¹²

Much of the tragic action in *Phèdre* emanates from and is sustained by rumour and gossip. In his preface to the play, Racine highlights both elements. While emphasizing the importance played both by history ('histoire') (as displayed in the work of a Roman historian like Plutarch) and myth ('fable') (as manifest in Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid*), Racine writes that

j'ai tâché de conserver la vraisemblance de l'histoire,
sans rien perdre des ornements de la fable, qui fournit
extrêmement à la poésie; et le bruit de la mort de
Thésée, fondé sur ce voyage fabuleux, donne lieu à
Phèdre de faire une déclaration d'amour qui devient
une des principales causes de son malheur, et qu'elle
n'aurait jamais osé faire tant qu'elle aurait cru que son
mari était vivant.

[I tried to maintain the plausibility of history, without
losing any of the embellishments of myth, which adds

greatly to the poetry; and the rumour of Theseus's death, based upon this mythical journey, allows Phaedra to make a declaration of love that becomes one of the main causes of her misfortune and one that she would have never dared make as long as she believed her husband to be alive.]

According to Racine, the (false) rumour ('bruit') that Phèdre's husband Thésée has died is directly responsible for Phèdre's declaration of love to her step-son Hippolyte. Moreover, the journey that Thésée is purported to have been on is itself 'fabuleux', meaning not only (as the 1690 Furetière dictionary sees it) 'Qui est faux' [what is false], but also 'inventé à plaisir' [invented for pleasure's sake]. Thésée's journey has been embellished through the retelling of it. It has therefore become not only rumour but also part of the story-telling that constitutes gossip.¹³

Racine's choice in his preface to give the examples of Plutarch and Virgil in order to contrast history and myth respectively is of particular interest when we consider the role played by rumour and gossip in each ancient writer's work. Plutarch tells the story in his *Moralia*, vol. VI, of the barber who gossips. As Hans-Joachim Neubauer elaborates with respect to this tale,

As an opponent of the Epicureans, Plutarch disapproves of idle talk. For this reason he also expands upon the story of the barber, and describes with relish other cases in which gossips and rumor-mongers have had to suffer severe punishments.¹⁴

Yet, the very reason Plutarch singles out such dangerous gossip ‘intimates the special status of informal talk’.¹⁵ As a historian, Plutarch might be distrustful of gossip, but he also recognizes its particular power.

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil shows also the dangers of gossip and rumour, depicting the traditional Roman goddess of rumour, Fama, as having multiple tongues and mouths, mouths that are just as capable as swallowing poison, both metaphorical and literal, as they are of disseminating news and gossip. In Book IV, which deals with the story of Dido and Aeneas (a book that Racine refers to in his preface to *Bérénice* as illustrating just the kind of ‘tristesse majestueuse’ [majestic sadness] that is essential to effective tragedy), not only does Fama announce ‘fact and fiction indiscriminately’, but we are told that ‘such gossip did vile Fama pepper on every mouth’.¹⁶ Yet, it is rumour that charges and changes the actions of those who receive the news. As we saw in Racine’s prefatory comments, the ‘ornements’ of the Virgilian ‘fable’ serve to add to poetic effect. In the case of the character

Phèdre, the false rumour of Thésée's death allows her the full articulation of her love for Hippolyte. Regardless of its truth or falsehood, the rumour almost becomes tailored to the needs of those who hear it. To quote J.C. Scott, 'As a rumor travels it is altered in a fashion that brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears and worldview of those who hear it and retell it'.¹⁷

The central characters in *Phèdre* respond in different ways to the rumour of Thésée's death according to the ramifications which this death will have on both their personal and especially their political prospects. And of course this principal rumour will elicit yet more rumours, such as that of the political danger that is raised by the presence of Aricie, Thésée's prisoner. This fear is voiced at the very time that Phèdre is informed of her husband's demise by Panope, in I, iv:

On dit même qu'au trône une brigue insolente
Veut placer Aricie, et le sang de Pallante. (329-30)
[‘Tis even said that a presumptuous faction
Would crown Aricia and the house of Pallas.]

Even from her prison, Aricie hears the rumour of her captor's death and her impending freedom. Her conversation in Act II, scene i with her *confidente* Ismène raises many interesting issues relating both to traditional

Greek perceptions of gossip and rumour and to her political and personal prospects. Indeed, in all of Racine's theatre, the *confidants* are often the principal purveyors of such speculative information:

ARICIE:

Ce n'est donc point, Ismène, un bruit mal affermi?

Je cesse d'être esclave, et n'ai plus d'Ennemi?

ISMÈNE:

Non, Madame, les Dieux ne vous sont plus contraires,

Et Thésée a rejoint les Mânes de vos Frères.

ARICIE:

Dit-on quelle aventure a terminé ses jours?

ISMÈNE:

On sème de sa mort d'incroyables discours.

On dit que Ravisser d'une Amante nouvelle

Les Flots ont englouti cet Époux infidèle.

On dit même, et ce bruit est partout répandu,

Qu'avec Pirithoüs aux Enfers descendu

Il a vu le Cocyte et les Rivages sombres,

Et s'est montré vivant aux infernales Ombres,

Mais qu'il n'a pu sortir de ce triste séjour,

Et repasser les bords qu'on passe sans retour. (375-388)

[ARICIA

'Tis not then, Ismene,

An idle tale? Am I no more a slave?

Have I no enemies?

ISMENE

The gods oppose

Your peace no longer, and the soul of Theseus

Is with your brothers.

ARICIA

Does the voice of fame

Tell how he died?

ISMENE

Rumours incredible

Are spread. Some say that, seizing a new bride,

The faithless husband by the waves was swallow'd.

Others affirm, and this report prevails,

That with Pirithous to the world below

He went, and saw the shores of dark Cocytus,

Showing himself alive to the pale ghosts;

But that he could not leave those gloomy realms,

Which whoso enters there abides for ever.]

In this extract, Aricie's doubts about the veracity of the news of Thésée's

death (asking if it is a 'bruit mal affermi') show how rumour is always

surrounded by uncertainty, or, to use Keith Botelho's words, how it remains

‘unverified and ambiguous information’.¹⁸ Yet, Ismène’s interpretation of the rumour as demonstration of the Gods’ benevolence points also to the ancient Greek conception of rumours as messages sent from the Gods.¹⁹ As early as the second song of Homer’s *Iliad*, for example, we find just such a sentiment in the words: ‘and Rumour blazed/ among them like a crier sent from Zeus’. Nonetheless, the fragility of such an assertion of belief by Ismène is brought out by the incessant repetition of ‘on dit’ in her tale. All that people can rely upon is hearsay and ‘incroyables discours’ [rumours incredible], narratives which are both unfounded and beyond belief.

Although they themselves emanate from a rumour, the stories, with all their embellishments, are not unlike the tales that characterize gossip.

Significantly, the use of the verbs ‘semer’ and ‘répandre’ shows how the various stories are disseminated; they spread like disease or poison.

The political freedom that Thésée’s death will bring to Aricie is accompanied by another, more personal, rumour or even piece of gossip, the possibility that Hippolyte is in love with Aricie. It is interesting that the word ‘bruit’ can mean both rumour and reputation, for Hippolyte’s reputation as an unfeeling and proud man is rehearsed by Ismène, who plays with the idea that she has seen visible signs of Hippolyte’s feelings even if he has not declared his love openly. Aricie’s delight at such an unverified

and ambiguous piece of information (it is ‘un discours qui peut-être a peu de fondement’) recalls the pleasure mingled with uncertainty that is so characteristic of gossip:

ISMÈNE:

Je sais de ses froideurs tout ce que l'on récite.
Mais j'ai vu près de vous ce superbe Hippolyte.
Et même, en le voyant le bruit de sa fierté
A redoublé pour lui ma curiosité.
Sa présence à ce bruit n'a point paru répondre.
Dès vos premiers regards je l'ai vu se confondre.
Ses yeux, qui vainement voulaient vous éviter,
Déjà pleins de langueur, ne pouvaient vous quitter.
Le nom d'Amant peut-être offense son courage.
Mais il en a les yeux, s'il n'en a le langage.

ARICIE:

Que mon coeur, chère Ismène, écoute avidement
Un discours, qui peut-être a peu de fondement! (405-416)

[ISMENE

I know what tales are told
Of proud Hippolytus, but I have seen
Him near you, and have watch'd with curious eye

How one esteem'd so cold would bear himself.
Little did his behavior correspond
With what I look'd for; in his face confusion
Appear'd at your first glance, he could not turn
His languid eyes away, but gazed on you.
Love is a word that may offend his pride,
But what the tongue disowns, looks can betray.

ARICIA

How eagerly my heart hears what you say,
Tho' it may be delusion, dear Ismene!]

As we have already seen from Racine's words in the preface, the crucial confession scene, Act II, scene v, emanates directly from Phèdre's assumption that her husband is dead. In addition to coming to see Hippolyte, ostensibly to argue for the protection of her young son (for which she needs prompting by Oenone at the beginning of the scene), Phèdre in effect makes use of two rumours, one false (Thésée's death) and one true (Hippolyte's intention to leave) as a preamble to admitting her love for him:

On dit qu'un prompt départ vous éloigne de nous,
Seigneur. A vos douleurs je viens joindre mes larmes. (584-5)
[I hear you leave us, and in haste. I come to add
My tears to your distress.]

In a time of uncertainty, rumours and counter-rumours abound, and it is

surely no coincidence that Phèdre's *aveu* is couched between two contradictory rumours. Just as Hippolyte assesses the shock of Phèdre's declaration of love, Théramène is able to report that he has heard the (to him, improbable) rumour that Thésée is alive. Hippolyte's quasi-forensic insistence (another form of exploration) on getting to the root of the story betrays both his desperation to allow for the possibility that his father still lives and the difficulty of discerning between true and false rumour:

THÉRAMÈNE:

Cependant un bruit sourd veut que le Roi respire.

On prétend que Thésée a paru dans l'Épire.

Mais moi qui l'y cherchai, Seigneur, je sais trop bien...

HIPPOLYTE:

N'importe, écoutons tout, et ne négligeons rien.

Examinons ce bruit, remontons à sa source.

S'il ne mérite pas d'interrompre ma course,

Partons, et quelque prix qu'il en puisse coûter,

Mettons le Sceptre aux mains dignes de le porter. (729-736)

[THERAMENES

A faint rumour meanwhile whispers

That Theseus is not dead, but in Epirus

Has shown himself. But, after all my search,

I know too well—

HIPPOLYTUS

Let nothing be neglected.

This rumour must be traced back to its source.

If it be found unworthy of belief,

Let us set sail, and cost whate'er it may,

To hands deserving trust the sceptre's sway.]

The reality of Thésée's return and the truth of this latter 'bruit' lead directly to the various silences of both Hippolyte and Phèdre which Thésée will misinterpret. For her part, from the moment that Thésée is known to be alive, Phèdre, on the one hand, hallucinates that her incestuous thoughts will themselves become a rumour, picked up even by inanimate objects and made public:

Il me semble déjà que ces murs, que ces voûtes

Vont prendre la parole, et prêts à m'accuser

Attendent mon Époux, pour le désabuser. (854-6)

[These vaulted roofs, methinks,

These walls can speak, and, ready to accuse me,

Wait but my husband's presence to reveal

My perfidy.]

On the other hand, she realizes that her children will have to face not only the reality of their mother's crime but also the words spoken by others about it, or, to put it differently, the gossip about her (the 'discours [...] trop véritable'):

Pour mes tristes Enfants quel affreux héritage!
Le sang de Jupiter doit enfler leur courage.
Mais quelque juste orgueil qu'inspire un sang si beau,
Le crime d'une Mère est un pesant fardeau.
Je tremble qu'un discours hélas! trop véritable
Un jour ne leur reproche une Mère coupable. (861-866)

[For my sons

How sad a heritage! The blood of Jove
Might justly swell the pride that boasts descent
From Heav'n, but heavy weighs a mother's guilt
Upon her offspring. Yes, I dread the scorn
That will be cast on them, with too much truth,
For my disgrace. I tremble when I think
That, crush'd beneath that curse, they'll never dare
To raise their eyes.]

When faced with the spectacle of his family in disarray, Thésée uses the verb ‘répandre’, which, as we have already seen, is a term that has already been associated with gossip or rumour in the play:

Que vois-je? Quelle horreur dans ces lieux répandue

Fait fuir devant mes yeux ma Famille éperdue? (953-4)

[Why, what is this? What terror has possess'd

My family to make them fly before me?]

From this moment, the verb itself seems to spread into the speech of all the protagonists. After Thésée has left his tongue-tied son in search of elucidation from Phèdre, Hippolyte takes up the image, but this time substituting ‘horreur’ with ‘poison’:

Dieux! Que dira le Roi? Quel funeste poison

L'amour a répandu sur toute sa Maison! (991-2)

[What will the King say? Gods! What fatal poison

Has love spread over all his house!]

If we follow the original punctuation of the first edition, as Forestier does in his Pléiade edition, Hippolyte’s ‘quel funeste poison’ is exclamatory rather than questioning. The ‘Maison’ (capitalized in the first edition and thereby given accentuated status) becomes, I would argue, not only Thésée’s household but the house of the theatre itself, and in particular that of

tragedy.

Hippolyte's next encounter with Thésée, during which he confesses his love for Aricie (a claim that his father chooses not to believe), provokes Thésée's invocation of Neptune to wreak punishment on his son (IV, iii). Phèdre (as yet ignorant of Hippolyte's love) pleads in the next scene, 'Respectez votre sang' [Respect your blood], so that the metaphorical family bloodline may not turn into the literal spreading of blood:

Ne me préparez point la douleur éternelle

De l'avoir fait répandre à la main paternelle. (1173-4)

[Save me the horror and perpetual pain

Of having caused his father's hand to shed it.]

Thésée's response, as well as revealing to Phèdre the awful reality that Hippolyte is a sentient being who loves another woman, points to his inability to believe Hippolyte's assertions:

Sa fureur contre vous se répand en injures.

Votre bouche, dit-il, est pleine d'impostures.

Il soutient qu'Aricie a son coeur, a sa foi,

Qu'il l'aime. (1185-8)

[His rage against you overflows in slanders;

Your mouth, he says, is full of all deceit,

He says Aricia has his heart and soul,
That her alone he loves.]

The ‘injures’ which Hippolyte is claimed to have spread have the same uncertain status as that of rumour, for Thésée is unable to distinguish between truth and lies; what is more, such words have the deadly effect of poison taking hold within the body, frighteningly proleptic of the actual self-administered venom that will soon end Phèdre’s life. Thésée utters very similar sentiments in V,3, accusing Hippolyte of loving Phèdre, even when confronted by Aricie, who herself dismisses Thésée’s assertions as unfounded rumours (‘d’horribles discours’).

Two ultimate ironies remain with respect to the imagery and language used in the play to denote rumour, gossip and poison. First, the same verb ‘répandre’ returns at the very moment that Thésée recognizes his mistake; yet Thésée witnesses, not poisonous rumours spreading, but rather Théràmène’s tears being shed as he prepares to give his narration of Hippolyte’s death:

THÉSÉE:

Mais d'où naissent les pleurs que je te vois répandre?

Que fait mon Fils? (V, 6, 1490-1)

[But whence these tears that overflow thine eyes?

How is it with my son?]

Second, the ancient Greek conjunction of rumour with the action of the Gods (as we saw earlier) returns at the very moment of Théràmène's description of Hippolyte's death as he is dragged to his death by his terrified horses. The possibility that a god, presumably Neptune, was seen forcing the horses to flee can only be described as an unverified rumour, as an 'on dit':

On dit qu'on a vu même, en ce désordre affreux
Un Dieu, qui d'aiguillons pressait leur flanc poudreux.
(1539-40)

[Some say a god, amid this wild disorder,
Was seen with goads pricking their dusty flanks.]

Ultimately, divine intervention remains as ambiguous and difficult to ascertain as any of the rumours that have circulated during the course of the play's action.

It only remains for Phèdre to verify the fact that Hippolyte is innocent, before the metaphor of spreading rumour/poison eventually becomes reality in the poison that spreads through Phèdre's veins at the end:

J'ai pris, j'ai fait couler dans mes brûlantes veines
Un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes. (1636-7)

[A poison, brought
To Athens by Medea, runs thro' my veins.]

The fact that Racine's final secular tragedy is concluded by such a vivid image of poison has a certain poignancy. In making his departure from the stage, Racine the 'empoisonneur public' in effect poisons his own theatre at the moment that venom takes its deadly effect within Phèdre's body. An initially insular squabble between supporters and detractors of the theatre is thus transmuted into something more profound: the nature of tragedy itself.²⁰

¹ See in particular Henry Phillips, *The theatre and its critics in seventeenth-century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) and Laurent Thirouin, *L'Aveuglement salutaire: le réquisitoire contre le théâtre dans la France classique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997). For an excellent reading of poison in *Phèdre*, see Amy Wygant, "Medea, Poison, and the Epistemology of Error in *Phèdre*," *Modern Language Review* 95, no. 1 (January 2000), 62-71. Although Wygant looks at Racine's part in the theatrical polemic, she does not consider the role played by Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, Goibaud du Bois and Barbier d'Aucour.

² The first ten *Lettres imaginaires* were published between January 1664 and November 1665; the remaining letters, published under the title *Les Visionnaires, ou seconde partie des lettres sur l'Hérésie Imaginaire, contenant les huit dernières*, were published in 1667.

³ Pierre Nicole, *Première Visionnaire*, in *Traité de la Comédie et autres pièces d'un procès du théâtre*, ed. Laurent Thirouin (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998), 219. All references to texts relating to the 'querelle du théâtre' will be taken from this edition; page numbers will appear in parentheses after each quotation.

⁴ All translations of the theoretical texts are my own. The translations from *Phèdre* are by Robert Bruce Boswell, as it appears on the Project Gutenberg website http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1977/1977-h/1977-h.htm#link2H_4_0001.

⁵ See Nicholas Hammond, "Authorship and Authority in Molière's *Le Misanthrope*," in D. Cannon and G. Evans, eds., *Essays on French Comic Drama from the 1640s to the 1780s* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 55-70, for a discussion of attitudes towards authorship in the seventeenth century.

⁶ According to Thirouin, he chose not to publish the last two pieces, either on the advice of Boileau or following an arrangement or compromise with Port-Royal (Nicole, *Traité de la Comédie*, 220).

⁷ In his second piece, "Lettre aux deux apologistes de l'auteur des *Hérésies Imaginaires*," which remained unpublished, Racine extended his theatrical comparison to Pascal's *Lettres provinciales*, asking, 'Et vous semble-t-il que les *Lettres provinciales* soient autre chose que des comédies?' (Ibid., p. 269). Wygant makes the convincing argument that Racine's spat with Nicole is less to do with defending the theatre than deciding who will be the new Pascal: 'the object of the discussion is not the apparent subject of the debate but rather rhetorical superiority itself', Wygant, "Medea, poison," 67.

⁸ For a discussion of the Port-Royal schools' use of selected extracts in the teaching process, see Nicholas Hammond, *Fragmentary Voices: memory and education at Port-Royal* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2004), especially 53-88.

⁹ Trying to apply biographical readings to pieces of theatre is inevitably a reductive exercise. For as great a cultural historian as Robert Darnton, for example, to interpret a speech by Agrippine in *Britannicus* as 'Racine declaiming against Nero' (*Poetry and the Police: communication networks in eighteenth-century Paris* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2010), 62), misses completely the dynamism of and authorial absence within theatrical exchange. Similarly, the Augustinian/Jansenist terms applied by certain critics to Racine's secular plays all too often become, as John Campbell has put it, 'so vague as to function only as a synonym for "pessimistic"', "Racine and the Augustinian inheritance: the case of *Andromaque*," *French Studies* (1999) LIII (3), 287-8.

¹⁰ Jean Racine, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol.1, ed. Georges Forestier (Paris: Pléiade, 1999), 819. All references to Racine's theatre and Louis Racine's memoir of his father are taken from this edition. Page or line references will appear in parentheses after each quotation.

¹¹ Silje Normand, "Perceptions of Poison: defining the poisonous in early modern France" (Cambridge PhD thesis, 2005), 19.

¹² Many scholars have considered *Phèdre* in a self-reflexive light, most notably Marc Fumaroli in *Héros et orateurs. Rhétorique et dramaturgie cornéliennes* (Geneva: Droz, 1990), 493-518, and, especially with respect to poison, Wygant, who refers to Racine's 'professional suicide' ("Medea, poison," 6) in the light of the character Phèdre's suicide. However, they do not explore the link between the spreading of rumour/gossip and that of poison.

¹³ See Nicholas Hammond, *Gossip, Sexuality and Scandal in France (1610-1715)* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), especially 5-49, for analysis of the role played by narrative in gossip.

¹⁴ Hans-Joachim Neubauer, *The Rumor: a cultural history*, trans. Christian Braun

(London: Free Association Books, 1999), 11.

¹⁵ Neubauer, *The Rumor*, 11.

¹⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Cecil Day-Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), IV, 96-7.

¹⁷ J.C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 145.

¹⁸ Keith M. Botelho, *Renaissance earwitnesses: rumor and early modern masculinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 10.

¹⁹ See Neubauer, 'The Greeks [...] were aware of rumours, and viewed them as a power bound up with the gods: as messengers of the immortal and a divine voice', *The Rumor*, 14.

²⁰ See Wygant, "Medea, poison," especially 68-71, for an ingenious discussion of 'erreur' in relation to Racine, poison and the theatre. We should not forget either that in the years immediately following the first performance of *Phèdre* in 1677, poison and rumours of poison were to exercise an even more powerful and vivid hold over the public imagination, with the outbreak of the 'Affaire des poisons' at the end of the same decade. But that is entirely another story. For recent discussions of the 'Affaire des poisons', see Normand, "Perceptions of poison," and Jean-Christian Petitfils, *L'Affaire des Poisons: crimes et sorcellerie au temps du Roi-Soleil* (Paris: Perrin, 2010).